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ABSTRACT

This study examined the Stratil Counseling Inventory (SCI) used for identifying college freshmen prone to dropping out and a program designed to increase student retention which stresses early, frequent, and rewarding faculty-student contact. The SCI was administered to college freshmen (N=213) who became involved in a retention management program comprised of faculty-student interaction, an orientation program, and appropriate use of resources. Results indicated that the SCI was able to accurately identify at-risk students; significant differences were found between scores of those who persisted and those who did not. Additionally, total retention increased from 61% in 1984 to 76.3% in 1986. Based on the significance of these results, it appears that dropout-prone students can be accurately identified at an early stage in their college careers, and a positive effect on retention can be achieved when a comprehensive program aimed toward the social and academic integration of students is initiated by the faculty of an institution. (Author/ABL)

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Student Retention

Increasing Retention on a College Campus Through At-Risk

Student Identification and Faculty-Student Contact

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Abstract

A comprehensive program for increasing student retention is presented. This program focuses on accurate identification of dropout-prone students through the use of the Stratil Counseling Inventory (1984) and stresses the importance of early, frequent, and rewarding faculty-student contact. Two hundred thirteen Freshmen were administered the SCI and became involved in a retention management program comprised of faculty-student interaction, an orientation program, and appropriate use of resources. Results indicated that the SCI was able to accurately identify at-risk students; a one-way analysis of variance conducted on the dropout proneness scores of Freshmen indicated a significant difference in the scores of those who persisted at the institution and those who did not ($p < .001$). Additionally, total retention increased from 61% in 1984 to 76.3% in 1986 ($p < .01$). Based on the significance of these results, it would appear that dropout-prone students can be accurately identified at an early stage in their college careers, and a positive effect on retention achieved when a comprehensive program aimed toward the social and academic integration of students is initiated by the faculty of an institution.

Increasing Retention on a College Campus Through At-Risk
Student Identification and Faculty-Student Contact

The issue of student retention is one which is of increasing concern to colleges and universities. With the college-age population decline that is expected to continue at least into the next decade (Frances, 1980), it is imperative that institutions of higher education develop and implement comprehensive, coherent, and effective plans for the retention of students. As the potential pool of students begins to shrink, these students are becoming more knowledgeable consumers of higher education, yet there is also a dearth of funds for student development. Thus college counseling centers must focus on those students who are most in need of the available resources. By identifying the factors correlated with attrition, colleges can begin to focus their student development efforts on those students who are most at-risk.

The overall attrition rate in United States colleges and universities is estimated to average approximately 32% (Noel & Levitz, 1983). More significantly, it has been discovered that half of the Freshmen who drop out before the end of the term do so in the first six weeks (Myers, 1981). Thus timing becomes a critical factor in the retention process.

There are numerous correlates of attrition, as outlined in Table 1. Of more use at the institutional level, however, is an approach which examines factors correlated with the retention of students. Although many models of the student retention process exist, the concept of social and academic integration is essential to a successful retention program (Astin, 1984; Pacarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977, 1980; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). Research demonstrates that 50% of students who have

not had some significant contact with a faculty or staff member in the first three weeks on campus drop out (Myers, 1981). Informal interaction with other students and faculty outside the classroom appears to be crucial to integrating students into the life of the college and thus becomes an important factor in retention, as well (Tinto, 1975).

Insert Table 1 about here

The process of becoming integrated both socially and academically into the life of the college involves two basic facets: personal congruency and frequent interaction. Congruency refers to a good "fit" between the needs, abilities, and interests of the student and those of the institution. For example, incongruency may arise when a student perceives the academic demands of the institution as being too difficult for his or her abilities, or when a student perceives a mismatch between his/her values and those of the institution.

Frequent interaction with students and faculty, as well as participation in campus activities, are also important elements in the integration process. When there is insufficient day-to-day contact with other people on campus, a student may begin to feel isolated and alienated from the institution. Frequent contact with faculty outside the classroom appears to be one of the most important forms of interaction that has an impact on the retention process (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977). The more frequent and rewarding those contacts, the greater the likelihood that students will persist at

that institution.

Membership in social groups comprised of their peers is also a valuable component in the process of integrating students into campus life, although not as essential to the retention process as is faculty contact (Tinto, 1985). Fraternity/sorority memberships, participation in intramural or intercollegiate athletics, or club memberships can foster social integration and thereby impact retention.

Many other factors are correlated with retention, and the literature is replete with documentation of the importance of financial support (Anderson, 1985), orientation activities (Anderson, 1985; Kramer & Washburn, 1983), counseling services (Sprandel, 1985), support systems (Baker & Siryk, 1983; Knott & Daher, 1978), and appropriate assessment and referral procedures (Anderson, 1985; Terenzini, 1982).

In order to focus our retention efforts more strategically, we chose to identify dropout-prone students and then to implement a program designed to foster the academic and social integration of students in general, with particular attention given to the at-risk students. Our hypothesis was that the retention rate would be significantly increased following the implementation of this comprehensive program focusing on early identification of dropout-prone students and efforts to enhance the social and academic integration of students into campus life.

Method

Subjects

A total of 213 Freshmen at Kentucky Christian College were administered

the Stratil Counseling Inventory (Stratil, 1984; hereafter labeled SCI) during the first week of school. All Freshmen were required to complete the inventory as part of the orientation process. One hundred eleven students completed the SCI in 1985 and an additional 102 students completed the inventory in 1986. Fifty-nine percent of the students were female; 41% were male.

Materials

The Stratil Counseling Inventory (Stratil, 1984) is specifically designed to identify dropout-prone and transfer-prone students. It consists of 230 items and is self-administering. There are several major scales of the SCI, each with adequately established reliability: Predictors of Academic Achievement ($\alpha = .73$; test-retest $r = .84$); Dropout Proneness ($\alpha = .74$; test-retest $r = .94$); Transfer Proneness ($\alpha = .50$; test-retest $r = .75$); Psychological Coping Status ($\alpha = .91$; test-retest $r = .94$); Motivational Profile (KR-20 $r = .74$), and Interest in Support Services ($\alpha = .79$).¹

Stratil (1984) identifies dropout-prone students as possessing the following characteristics: low self-esteem, low social adjustment, low expectations of academic success, poor study habits, concentration difficulties, hostility toward school, susceptibility to test distress, weak educational values, low parental education, academic difficulties in high school, campus social isolation, family discord, homesickness, lack of campus-related employment, low achievement motivation, and emotional conflicts. Although few, if any, students possess all of these characteristics, these are all variables which are assessed by the SCI.

Procedure

The first phase of our retention program involved the administration of the SCI to all Freshmen during the first week of the Fall semester, as part of the orientation process. Completed SCI forms were sent to the publisher for scoring and interpretation.

The second phase of the program began the second week of the Fall semester. Fourteen faculty/staff members were selected by the Retention Committee and were asked to serve as "retention liaisons" between the administration and the students. These 14 faculty who agreed to participate were then trained in the interpretation of the SCI results. The training session was conducted by the Chairperson of the Behavioral Sciences Department, who holds a Ph.D. in Psychology. The session lasted approximately 2½ hours. Faculty were also instructed in the purpose of the retention program and in techniques for developing rapport with students.

Each faculty member was then assigned an average of eight students, usually on the basis of major or area of interest. Faculty approached each student individually, explaining that the SCI results were available, and made an appointment with the student to discuss the results, after obtaining a written informed consent for access to the student's scores.

During the initial interview with each student, faculty discussed the inventory results, provided information that the student had requested on the SCI, explained school policy as needed, and oriented the student to campus organizations and services. Students were encouraged to share their feelings about the institution, their career plans, and any difficulties they may be having. Additionally, faculty referred students to appropriate

resources as necessary. All faculty completed a "retention contact report" (see Figure 1) after termination of the initial interview.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Follow-up was done on each student, through personal contact by the retention liaison or, in some cases, the Dean of Students, to determine if resources were being appropriately utilized. Faculty were also encouraged to maintain personal contact with their assigned students through informal settings outside of the classroom.

The final phase of the program involved an orientation course which lasted an entire semester and was required of all Freshmen, for two credit hours. This course focused on selecting a career and on informing students about the college. Additional information on study habits, test anxiety, money management, and values was also presented in the course. Part of the course requirements involved participation in an intramural activity, attendance of at least one campus event, and an interview of a faculty member, conducted by the student. These requirements endeavored to integrate students both socially and academically into the college.

Results

Descriptive analyses indicates that our retention rate increased from 61% to 76.3% over a three-year period ($p < .01$). It might also be noted that the bulk of that increase, from 61% to 73%, occurred after the first year of the retention program.² Of those who had been identified as

dropout-prone by the SCI, 54% did indeed dropout after one year or less. The SCI accurately identified 77.4% of our Freshmen dropouts as at-risk. It was also noted that 60% of our dropouts had high maladjustment scores, as assessed by the SCI.

A one-way analysis of variance was computed on the dropout-proneness scale scores of all Freshmen. A comparison of these scale scores was conducted between those students who had withdrawn from the institution after one year or less and those students who had persisted for at least one year. The results indicated that there was a significant difference in the scale scores of these two groups ($p < .001$; see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from the data. The first conclusion is that it is possible to accurately identify dropout-prone students via the Stratil Counseling Inventory. This finding alone is noteworthy, because no other comprehensive measure is readily available to institutions for the identification of such students. When an institution is able to accurately identify at-risk students, resources can then be allocated more appropriately to those students who are most in need. Having access to the SCI enables college personnel to initiate contact with students who might never have otherwise been approached, and to know in advance the actual areas of need expressed by those students.

The second conclusion is that a comprehensive retention program which

utilizes faculty and focuses on the social and academic integration of students can have a positive impact on the retention rate of an institution. As Astin (1977) notes,

Student-faculty interaction has a stronger relationship to student satisfaction with the college experience than any other involvement variable, or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic. Students who interact frequently with faculty are more satisfied with all aspects of their institutional experience, including student friendships, variety of courses, intellectual environment, and even administration of the institution. (p. 223)

Beal and Noel (1980) confirm that the retention factor considered most important by all types of institutions is the "caring attitude of faculty and staff" (p. 19).

There are several reasons why faculty-student contact is such a vital part of successful retention efforts. The first reason is that faculty are often the visible representatives of an institution. Initial impressions of an institution seem to significantly influence student opinion of that institution (Toy, 1985), and the first impression students often receive is of the faculty and staff. Granted, interaction with other students also comprises these first impressions, but often these student interactions focus on the quality of the faculty and staff. The "campus grapevine" conditions students' perspectives of faculty and staff early in their Freshman year; thus the importance of faculty-student contact with Freshmen is underscored (Pantages & Creedon, 1978; Toy, 1985). Classroom contact makes faculty the most accessible agents of an institution, and thus the performance and attitudes of faculty are often seen as a reflection of the institution as a whole. An interesting sidelight is that two-thirds of those students who dropout report being dissatisfied

with faculty (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985). It appears that dissatisfaction with faculty and dissatisfaction with the institution go hand-in-hand.

A second reason for the importance of faculty-student contact is that it facilitates social interaction. Many students greatly value faculty friendships, for various reasons, and becoming involved with faculty outside the classroom builds these relationships. Faculty may function as surrogate parents, they may "fill the gap" for students until friendships with peers are fully developed, or they may be perceived as mature adults with whom students can discuss important issues. Whatever the reasons, interaction with faculty appears to facilitate social integration of the student into the college community. The more integrated the student is, the more committed to the institution he/she will be, and the more likely to persist.

A final reason for the importance of faculty-student contact is that this interaction also serves to integrate the student into the institution academically. First and foremost faculty are teachers; they are the chief catalysts in the learning process. Thus quality of instruction greatly affects the students' perceptions of an institution and also impacts their academic performance. Particularly within the student's major, faculty often serve as mentors, greatly impacting not only the student's success within that institution, but also potentially his/her future occupational success. Faculty can serve as role models of professional behavior and expertise within their discipline, reflecting high standards of competence that students often desire to emulate. This

desire can then be translated into quality academic performance. Faculty also serve as advisers, aiding students as they navigate the waters of the institution's curriculum. Students who receive effective academic advising tend to report positive attitudes toward the institution (Crockett, 1978), indicating a successful integration into the academic life of the college.

For all these reasons the importance of early, frequent, and rewarding faculty-student contact cannot be overestimated. This type of contact can serve as a "primary prevention effort" for attrition. The accurate identification of at-risk students is a secondary prevention measure which is also a necessary facet of a successful retention program. The combination of these two approaches provides a comprehensive method for preventing attrition. Personal contact with faculty, such as that modeled by our retention program, affords students the kind of relationships that leads to social and academic integration into the college and thus with the resources and support that can conceivably foster retention.

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Footnotes

¹It should be noted that the Stratil Counseling Inventory (Stratil, 1984) is no longer on the market. Its author, Michael L. Stratil, has collaborated with the Noel/Levitz Retention Management Systems in a revised version of the inventory. It is now entitled the College Student Inventory and is available to institutions through the Noel/Levitz Centers, 1039 Arthur Street, Iowa City, IA 52240.

²Our retention rate continues to increase, albeit slowly. Current retention figures for 1987-1988 indicate a rate of 78%, up another 1.7% from the previous year.

Table 1

Correlates of Attrition

Academic Boredom

Undecided Major

Transition/Adjustment Difficulties

Unrealistic Expectations

Academic Underpreparedness

Incompatibility

Irrelevancy

Concern About Finances

Table 2

Analysis of Variance Comparison of Dropout Proneness Scores Between
College Persisters and Non-Persisters

Source	df	SS	MS	F
Between Groups	1	4534.21	4534.21	48.24***
Within Groups	211	19832.71	93.99	
Total	212	24366.92		

***p .001

Stratil Counseling Inventory

Retention Contact Report

Name of Student _____

Intervention Code: _____ Box Number _____

Date of Contact _____ Informed Consent? ☐ yes ☐ no

Any comments regarding the informed consent procedure?

Were any needs expressed for which you were unprepared? ☐ yes ☐ no

Explain:

How would you rate the responsiveness of the student? (circle one)

1	2	3	4	5
uncooperative	uninterested	somewhat receptive	fairly responsive	very open and interested

How would you rate your handling of the initial session? (circle one)

1	2	3	4	5
It didn't go well at all	Not very satisfactory	Okay	Things went fairly smoothly	I was very pleased; it went well

Plans for future contact or follow-up:

Is referral needed? ☐ yes ☐ no If yes, explain:

If already referred:

Referred to _____ Date _____

Purpose _____

Liaison Signature: _____ Date _____

Figure 1.